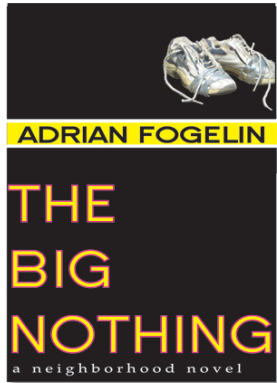


# TEACHER'S GUIDE

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## The Big Nothing

Written by Adrian Fogelin

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Ages 8–12 | Realistic Fiction | Neighborhood Novels

AR • RC • F&P • GRL Y; Gr 6

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### ABOUT THE BOOK

Justin Riggs is going through some big changes. His brother has joined the army and has been shipped off to Iraq. His father has left the family, maybe for good this time. His mother is in a depression and spends most of the day in bed. Justin has to rely on his friends for support. However, now his best friend has gotten himself a girlfriend and is never around. The only friend left is Jemmie Lewis.

Jemmie is nice, beautiful and popular. Jemmie is the friend that Justin needs, but his feelings soon start to change towards her. Justin starts to find activities that he knows will get him closer to Jemmie. She has an old piano in her living room and Jemmie's grandmother has offered to teach him. Will the music he makes be the tool he needs to win her love?

### THEMES

- Friendship
- Adolescents dealing with family problems
- Multicultural relationships
- Self-image
- Life skills: responsibility and unselfishness
- Loneliness
- Discovering one's talent
- Communication
- War

### BEFORE YOU READ

- Discuss what students do to take their minds off problems. In the book, Justin finds that when he has

problems, there is nothing more relaxing than sitting down and playing the piano.

- Make a chart of what a talent is and what talents students in the class have. Hang this on the wall so everyone can see and share what talents their classmates possess. They can also tell what talents they wish they had.
- Go over story structure (introduction, setting, complication, climax, twist, etc.).
- Make predictions about the old shoes on the front cover.
- Familiarize students with how segregation affects the interactions of many Americans today.
- Discuss war and its effect on the family.
- Communication is a major theme throughout the text. Therefore, examining gender differences in communication forms would help the students relate to the protagonist.
- Students should discuss differences of family structures in American culture: nuclear family, extended family, blended family.
- Students can engage in class discussions focusing on general responses to interracial relationships.

### AS YOU READ

Use these and other writing prompts to get students started:

- What resources are available to Justin for food, emotional support, help buying a piano, and increasing grades?
- Does everyone experience these problems, or are

some individuals excluded due to their race, socioeconomic background, rural or urban areas and size of family?

- Does envy promote competitiveness, anger or neither? Does Justin experience any of these things?
- Point out when different story structure elements are occurring.
- Pre-teach key vocabulary words by having students skim to find them, and then use context clues to guide them to a definition.
- Point out that this book is realistic fiction and list the traits of realistic fiction.
- Have students get into small groups and discuss key questions from the chapters. Then have the groups share their findings.

### AFTER YOU READ

Friendship is a heavy theme throughout the book. To most people, their friendships would not survive some of the trials within the book. However, their permanence helps Justin through rough times.

- Have the students discuss some aspects of these complex friendships. Did Justin and Leroy dislike one another? Should people remain friends when they like the same person? If so, how do they handle the situation or how would their relationship change?
- Is it fair that Leroy has to watch his younger brother? Is this becoming more common in today's society? Is this hurting or helping Leroy's relationship with his brother?
- Is Cass and Ben's relationship healthy? Why or why not? Is it possible to have an unhealthy relationship even when there isn't any violence or abuse in the relationship? What are some key components of a healthy relationship?
- How loyal should friends be to one another? If someone's life is at risk, should you tell or not?
- Ask students what surprised them in the story. Then discuss the definition of "twist" again and see if their surprises qualify as a twist.
- Discuss how music affected Justin. Point out the chart of the students' talents and talk about how they use their talents.
- Predict how Jemmie reacts to the last line of the book. Back it up with examples from the book.
- Describe what the "Big Nothing" is. Why did the author use this as the title of the book?
- Use the predictions from the "Before You Read" section and the information learned from the book to talk about the old shoes from the front cover.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

### LANGUAGE ARTS

- Keep a list of unfamiliar, difficult or intriguing words. In groups of four, look up the definitions and discuss their context. As a class, keep a list of words that appear in multiple groups. Upon completion of the text, students will write a short story speculating about what happened after the school dance. The students must incorporate the list of vocabulary words compiled as an entire class.
- Break the class up into groups of four. Have the groups focus on similes, metaphors, symbolism, and sources. Each group will be assigned either similes, metaphors, symbolism or sources. Each group will look for their assigned writing component during their reading. The sources group must find outside books containing their groups' component in various forms such as narrative, expository, poetry, etc. Have groups present and explain their findings to the class at the beginning, middle, and end of the book.
- Have students sign up for how they want to communicate with their parents about something the parent does not know about them. Forms of communication are limited to video, voice recording, a letter, pictures, or dramatization. The student must explain why their chosen method is a form of communication and why it may be beneficial to some but hindering for others.
- Discuss formal and informal letter structures and their components such as greetings and salutations.

### SOCIAL STUDIES

- Have students discuss how the story would differ if Justin and his friends were from the upper class or from an extremely poor environment. Some writing or discussion prompts you may ask include: Would Justin still be interested in Jemmie? Would the school be very homogenous? If so, would there be any African Americans in the school? Would Justin still stress about his father not returning? Would Jemmie be more interested in Leroy since he would be free because his mother would probably only have to work one job or stay at home? How would money influence the friendships in the text?
- Would the story have been any different if the protagonist was a girl dealing with the same issues?
- Could Justin's mother possibly have a mental illness? Have the students investigate her symptoms via

interviews, Internet, the library, and other resources. Have them provide possible illnesses and remedies.

- Justin uses the piano as a coping mechanism. Have the students write a journal entry about coping mechanisms they have utilized and why they are successful. Then have students that want to share do so informally.
- Many cultures have extended families, which would have increased Justin's resources immensely. Research one Eastern culture family structure and compare it to that of the American individualistic culture. Students should provide photographs and pictures of the residences of the other cultures.

### MATH

Have all students find one inexpensive item from home that they think they could sell. Have them come up with advertisement slogans (visual or auditory), research how much someone may want to pay for the item and bring it in for a mock class sale. The students will go around the room and "purchase" items with generic checks. The sales person must be able to calculate sales tax, check ID and make sure the check is written properly. Whoever has the best ad and receives the most checks, wins a secret prize. The class will vote for the best ad (excluding their own).

### HEALTH / SCIENCE

- Justin mentions several times that he is overweight. Two people can be the same age and weight and it is entirely possible for one to be overweight and the other to be within their expected weight range. Have the students provide reasons for why this may be.
- Have students develop a week's worth of meal plans for a diabetic, an overweight person, and someone that has high blood pressure. Have them provide explanations for how these chronic illnesses differ and how they are similar, if at all. Have the students provide available resources that would help these individuals eat healthier.
- Have the students chart the evolution of the domestic cat. Have students identify other animals that are domesticated or that have physically changed because of their environment.

### REVIEWS

★ "...Fogelin plots a thoroughly engaging story of teen angst, multicultural and political divisions, and a natural desire of neighbors to come to one another's aid. The characters may be doves, hawks, or melanges in between, but they are sincere in their beliefs and yet can find room in their hearts to pull together for Duane. Serious and humorous by turns, this seemingly simple story is actually quite complex but not weighty and will be enthusiastically embraced." —*School Library Journal*

"Fogelin's character-driven narrative... speaks of the painful transitions of adolescence with rare humor and honesty." —*Booklist*

"...War in Iraq gives this story a definite place in time, and its distinct characters make it satisfying and surprisingly realistic. Misfit finds fit."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Fogelin, the author of *Crossing Jordan* and other novels for YAs, sensitively describes Justin's world and his conflicting emotions as he tries to deal with his situation at home and with shifting relationships with his friends.

An absorbing and well-written tale." —*Kliatt*

### AWARDS

- Young Hoosier Book Award (nominee, middle grades) —Association for Indiana Media
- Young Adult Top Forty —Pennsylvania School Librarians Association
- For Teens, by Teens: Teens Recommended Reading List —Just Read, Florida!

**Adrian Fogelin's  
Neighborhood Novels:**

*Anna Casey's Place in the World*  
*The Big Nothing*  
*Crossing Jordan*  
*My Brother's Hero*  
*Some Kind of Magic*  
*The Sorta Sisters*

**Also available from Adrian Fogelin:**

*The Real Question*  
*Sister Spider Knows All*  
*Summer on the Moon*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Adrian Fogelin is the author of nine titles for middle grade and young adult readers. Open one of her books, and you'll meet the kids in her home neighborhood in Tallahassee, Florida, where she and a band of trusty volunteers maintain the Front Porch Library—where local patrons usually arrive by bike or on foot. Adrian is also a songwriter and half of the musical duo “Hot Tamale.”

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Peachtree Teacher's Guide for  
**THE BIG NOTHING**  
prepared by Kenyette Kilpatrick

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